DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 381 332 RC 020 053

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TITLE Effective Teachers: Perceptions of Native American Students in Rural Areas.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Mar 95
CONTRACT H029B20092-94
NOTE 5p.; In: Reaching to the Future: Boldly Facing Challenges in Rural Communities. Conference Proceedings of the American Council on Rural Special Education (ACRES) (Las Vegas, Nevada, March 15-18, 1995); see RC 020 016.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *American Indian Education; *Cultural Awareness; Elementary Secondary Education; *Navajo (Nation); Rural Schools; *Student Attitudes; *Student Evaluation of Teacher Performance; Student Experience; Student Surveys; *Teacher Effectiveness; Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS *Native Americans

ABSTRACT

This paper examines perceptions of Native American students regarding effective practices of non-Native teachers. A survey of students in grades 3-12 in 3 rural school districts on the Navajo Reservation (Arizona) questioned 148 Navajo students and 10 non-Native students. The sample included 28 special needs students (17.7 percent). The survey consisted of open-ended questions regarding what kind of teacher students learned the most from; what students would do in the classroom if they were teachers; qualities of ideal teachers; what teachers do in the classroom that discourages learning; student preferences for English-only or bilingual teachers; and the degree to which teachers should be aware of students' cultural background. Results reveal that students learn more from hands-on projects and teachers who encourage varied means of learning. Students also stressed that it was important for teachers to treat students with respect and to teach responsibility. Students indicated that if they were teachers they would teach patience and honesty, tolerance, and the golden rule. Students felt that the most important teacher qualities were respect, kindness, positive attitude, patience, and sense of humor, and that teachers should avoid talking too fast, making fun of Native culture, and giving boring lectures. Although many students felt that a bilingual teacher was not necessary, many others desired to learn more about their Native language. An overwhelming number of students felt that teachers needed to be more sensitive to Native culture. (LP)

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EFFECTIVE TEACHERS: PERCEPTIONS OF NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENTS IN RURAL AREAS

There is evidence to support that Native American students process information different from that of non-Native students. Some examples the research has cited have been that Native learners are visual learners. They prefer to be shown materials in a hands-on approach. They like to be guided through general principles in a holistic approach to learning, rather than starting with parts to build toward the whole. They are cooperative learners and socially oriented, as opposed to task oriented and competitive. (Gilliand, 1992)

Some research has suggested abandoning the emphasis on learning styles. These researchers would rather look at what teaching accommodations have proven most effective with Native American students in the classroom. Some of the suggestions they make are to avoid spotlighting for praise or criticism, to accept silence, to be sensitive to traditional backgrounds, and be aware of possible problems between students and their language barriers. (Sawyer, 1991)

One question that has received only minimal attention is; what do the actual students perceive as effective teachers. Living in a rural area on the Navajo reservation where the students are predominantly Native American and the teachers have been predominantly non-Native, we became interested in what the students perceived as effective teachers. This question was investigated (Pavlick, 1994) with senior high school students in a neighboring community on the reservation. Pavlick's findings indicated that students prefer discipline in a relaxed classroom environment, along with one on one teacher student communications, with the belief that everyone could achieve with a positive attitude.

We conducted an informal pilot study to obtain information on Native American students perceptions of effective teachers. We surveyed a total of 158 students in three school districts, including 85 males, and 73 females, ranging from grades three to twelve. The sample included 148 Native Americans (Navajos), along with 10 non-Natives. Twenty-eight of the students surveyed were special needs students representing 17.72% of the total students surveyed.

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The survey consisted of these six open ended questions:

1. What kind of teacher do you learn the most from?
2. If you were a teacher what would you do in your classroom? What wouldn't you do?
3. What one outstanding quality does your ideal teacher possess?
4. What are some things that teachers do that may prevent you from learning?
5. Do you prefer a teacher who uses English only, or one that is bilingual? Why?
6. Do you believe effective teachers need to be aware and sensitive of the culture of the students they are teaching? Explain?

The questions were read aloud to all of the students, most of these students wrote their own response directly on the survey, with the exception of the younger students who dictated their answers.

In response to question one: What kind of teacher do you learn the most from? Many students seemed to enjoy more hands-on projects, and new ideas. Students also seemed to like it when teachers treat them with respect while teaching them responsibility; to be taught in a way where students understand. Examples of specific quotes are as follows:

•I learn the most from teachers who have hands-on projects. They listen to your ideas. They don't make you feel uncomfortable when you talk to them.
•Teachers that explain new ideas and show new ideas on how to learn different things in different ways.
•Ones that show respect and teach me responsibility.
•She can always help and explain things when you don't understand.
•I learn the most from strict teachers who give homework, who are easy to be with, and have a good sense of humor.

In response to question two; if you were a teacher, what would you do in your classroom? What wouldn't you do? A summary of the responses indicate they would teach with patience and honesty, being careful to never put anyone down and to teach by the golden rule. Some of the students responses were as follows:

•Teach kids, be honest, and I wouldn't yell at my students. I would have to be patient.
•As a teacher I would try to get to know each person individually. To see how they were doing at home and at school.
•Help them but never put them down, help them understand and make learning be fun and interesting.
•I would teach my class, treat them the way they want to be treated.

When asked question three; what one outstanding quality does your ideal teacher possess?, The majority of our students responded with; respect, kindness, positive attitude, patience, and a sense of humor.

In response to question four; what are some things that teachers do that may prevent you from learning? Teachers often talk too fast, make fun of the Native Culture, and have boring lectures. A few of the comments are as follows:

- Slangs about their culture.
- Having boring lectures, talking too slow.
- Letting kids mess around or talk when someone else is talking.
- They move through a section of work too fast, and don't explain the work, often speak too quickly and don't repeat themselves.

The responses to question five were split; do you prefer a teacher who uses English only, or one that is bilingual? Why? Many students expressed enough fluency in English that a bilingual teacher was not a necessity. However many expressed a longing to learn more about their Native language. Some felt that having a Native speaker would be more beneficial.

Question six; do you believe effective teachers need to be aware and sensitive of the culture of the students they are teaching? Explain. An overwhelming response was in favor of cultural sensitivity. They believed it was important so that their culture was not made fun of. Also, so that the teacher would not be put in an unknowing situation which could allow them to offend their students. However, some expressed the fact that they still want to be taught the basic skills; reading, math, writing, with culture not being a big issue.

We realize the scientific limitations of this pilot study. However, we feel it may have some practical implications for individuals considering teaching Native American students.

In summary, we feel that teaching the culture and being fluent in the native language is not always necessary, however sensitivity to the culture and varying of teaching techniques is important. Also, having a good rapport with the Native American students is beneficial.

This paper was supported in part by Personnel Preparation Grants No. H029B20092-94 from the United States Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs.

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